

SHIELD WEEKLY

TRUE STORIES FROM
FAMOUS CHIEFS



THE NOTE-BOOKS OF
OF POLICE

CALLED DOWN

or Steve Manley in a Desperate Strait
BY ALDEN F. BRADSHAW



SHIELD WEEKLY

TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES • STRANGER THAN FICTION

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CALLED DOWN;

OR,

Steve Manley in a Desperate Strait.

By ALDEN F. BRADSHAW.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR.

"She has been murdered! Her life has been cruelly sacrificed, that the infamy of some heartless man might not be exposed! She is the victim of treachery, the dupe of some scoundrel whose hands now are red with the crime he has committed! She has been killed by the villain who misled——"

"Hush! hush, young woman! You are not yet sure of this."

"I am sure of it—I am! I feel it here in my heart! I loved my sister. And I feel that my suspicions are more reliable than the deductions of your cold reasoning. Oh, Chief O'Mara, I am certain that my darling sister has been cruelly wronged and killed!"

These were the tragic declarations which, on the morning of April fifteenth, were made

in the presence of Chief O'Mara and several of his inspectors, who were gathered in the chief's office in the bureau of detectives at the police headquarters.

They had issued from the lips of a tall, stylishly-dressed girl of great beauty, and whose language and bearing, despite her almost ungovernable emotion, indicated that she was a girl of education and refinement. She was about twenty-two, of the blonde type, with forceful features, a delicate complexion and large, expressive blue eyes.

The latter were flooded with tears while she thus gave utterance to her feelings, and all who observed her noticed that her stately figure, for she was standing erect near the chief's desk, was trembling with emotion and distress.

Steve Manley, the young detective, who

was among those present, thought her one of the prettiest young women he had ever seen.

Chief O'Mara read again the brief but startling note this girl had given him on entering with her companion, who was a young man about her own age, and who stood beside her on the floor. The missive was written on delicate, scented paper, and read as follows:

"JOSIE, MY DARLING SISTER:

"I know you cannot love me after what I am about to do, but I shall always love you just the same, and cherish very dearly all our past relations. I have no alternative but to go as I am going. If I remain here, only shame and sorrow will be mine, and I could not meet your tender, loving eyes without an anguish no sister's heart could endure. I am going away with one who has promised to amend, if possible, the great wrong of which he is guilty, and you will never see me again. Try to think kindly of me, as I shall always think with such loving sorrow and remorse of you. I am writing this with tears in my eyes, and with a heart broken with grief; yet I must do what I am doing. Forgive me, if you can.

"YOUR SISTER BELLE."

This was the communication, and experience had taught Chief O'Mara how to read between the lines of such a piteous farewell.

"You say that your sister left this note fastened to the pin-cushion in her chamber?" he asked, gravely, looking up at the pale face of the girl opposite.

"Yes, sir; I found it there this morning."

"At what time did your sister leave home last evening?"

"About half-past nine, sir."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"She said she had been invited to go to ride with a gentleman friend, and was to meet him outside. Also that she might not return until quite late, and that I need not sit up for her."

"What is your name?"

"Josie West, sir."

"And your sister's?"

"Belle West, sir," replied the girl, with a sob.

"Your parents——"

"Alas, sir, my parents are dead!" interposed Josie West, taking the chair which her escort now brought forward.

"Where do you live?"

"On Morningside avenue, sir, near the Allegheny Cemetery. We lived alone, my sister and I, in the house left us by the death of my father three years ago."

"Are you girls of means?"

"Enough to live on, sir."

"Have you been living alone?"

"Yes, sir, since my father died."

"Do you know to what gentleman your sister refers in this letter?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"Have you no suspicion?"

"Nothing definite, sir. I know only that Belle has been friendly, and in correspondence, with some man for the past three months, but she never told me who he was."

"Have you examined her letters?"

"They all have been destroyed, sir."

"With a view to concealing the identity of her betrayer?"

"It would seem so, sir. She has not left a trace of anything that would suggest who the man may be."

"Why, then, do you suspect that she has been murdered?" demanded Chief O'Mara, "rather than that she has voluntarily fled with the man?"

"Because, sir, I believe these precautions have been taken at the man's instigation," replied Josie West, with much feeling.

"Then you think he did this solely with a design to safely put your sister out of the way?"

"That is just what I think, sir! It was not like my sister to have kept the truth

from me, unless influenced by another, and by one she stood in fear of."

"How old is your sister Belle?"

"She is twenty-one."

"Of your style?"

"She is darker, sir, and very pretty. Mr. Barrows, sir, will tell you she is the last girl in the world to have willfully kept the truth from me. He thinks he saw her last night, riding with the man in question."

Chief O'Mara turned to the young man indicated, who had remained standing by Miss West's chair.

He was a slight, dark-eyed man of twenty-odd, with rather effeminate features and a very clear complexion, unmarred by the first sign of mustache or beard. Yet his face was very attractive, his eyes frank and honest, and Josie West might very naturally have been deeply in love with him.

"Are you Mr. Barrows?" demanded Chief O'Mara.

"Yes, sir," bowed the young gentleman, toying nervously with his hat. "And what Josie—pardon me! what Miss West says, is true. I also believe that her sister is the victim of some kind of foul play, and that some Pittsburg man is responsible for her mysterious disappearance."

"There is not very much mystery in her departure," returned Chief O'Mara, shortly. "She tacitly states in this note that she was about to run away with a man. Where do you think you saw them last evening?"

"Crossing the Forty-third street bridge, sir."

"At what time?"

"Not far from half-past eight," replied Barrows, promptly. "I had occasion to go over to Millvale borough yesterday afternoon, and was then returning. When near the middle of the bridge, a rapidly-driven buggy passed me. I could not swear that Miss West was one of the occupants, for it

then was quite dark; but that was my first impression as the team went by me."

"Did you notice her companion?"

"I only know that a man was driving. I did not see his face."

"Can you describe the horse?"

"It was a reddish horse, sir; a sorrel, I think."

"What is your business, Mr. Barrows?"

"I am a collecting agent for a New York sewing-machine firm, sir, for which I have been at work about a year."

"Where do you live?"

"I board on Dearborn street, sir, where I have lived since coming to Pittsburg a year ago."

"Are you related to these West girls?"

"I am engaged to marry Miss Josie West," replied Barrows, indicating with quiet dignity the girl seated in the chair.

"Ah, yes, I see. Did you notice, Mr. Barrows, which way the carriage went after leaving the Forty-third street bridge?"

"No, sir; I did not wait until it——"

"Wait now, please!"

This interruption by the chief was occasioned by the sudden appearance of a man in the uniform of a local police.

The expression on the intruder's face, together with his hurried entrance, indicated that something unusual had occurred, or been discovered.

In his hand he carried a small leather satchel, such as ladies use for their purse and handkerchief; while hanging over his arm by its ribbons was a lady's dainty bonnet, which evidently had lately been drenched with water.

The instant her eyes fell upon these articles, a shriek that chilled all hearers broke from Josie West; and before a hand could be raised to her aid, she had pitched face forward to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE CRIME.

"Look after this girl!" cried Chief O'Mara, springing to his feet. "Bring some water, Steve, quick."

"She has fainted!" exclaimed Sidney Barrows, dropping to his knee beside the fallen girl.

Aided by Chief O'Mara, he raised her from the floor and laid her upon a couch near by, while Steve Manley rushed to the lavatory for water. Her restoration was the work of a few minutes only, and presently the fluttering eyelids of the inanimate beauty indicated her returning consciousness.

"My sister—Belle!" were the first words that issued from her gray lips. "She is dead—murdered!"

"Hush! We will see," said Chief O'Mara, gently. "Are you able to sit up?"

"Yes, yes, I am better!" she cried, with returning strength. "Help me to the chair again."

"Give her a drop of brandy," suggested the sergeant. "Here is some."

Josie West accepted the glass from the hand of her escort, and the stimulant quickly sent a tinge of color into her white cheeks. Then her eyes took on again that former expression of grief and distress, and were turned wildly about in search of the officer whose entrance had overcome her.

Having seen the effect he had produced, he considerably had drawn to one side; but at a gesture from Chief O'Mara, he came forward.

"You must be calm, young lady," said the latter; "and meet this situation bravely. I wish to question you further."

"I am calm now!" exclaimed Miss West. "I know only too well that my poor sister is dead, and I ask only that you will do what you can to find her body, and bring her murderer to justice."

"Your agitation——"

"Do not mind that! I'll not cry any more—not here. What do you want to ask me?"

"Come nearer, Mercer!" commanded Chief O'Mara. "What have you there?"

But Josie West answered for the officer.

"Belle's bonnet and hand-bag!" she cried, impulsively. "I recognized them instantly. It was the sight of them that made me faint."

"How came you by them, Mercer?"

"The bonnet was found in the river, Chief O'Mara, up above the Forty-third street bridge," replied the patrolman. "I found the hand-bag, sir, on the bank of the stream some distance beyond. There is considerable evidence that a very serious crime has been committed."

"Oh, you may speak plainly, officer!" cried Miss West, observing the solicitous look he cast in her direction. "I am prepared to hear the worst. Please, Chief O'Mara, get at the truth of this tragedy as quickly as possible."

"What are the particulars, Mercer?" demanded Chief O'Mara.

The officer then explained.

"It was reported to me, sir, when I first went on my beat this morning, that several alarming screams were heard last night between ten and eleven o'clock, from a quarter some distance above the bridge."

"On the Millvale side?"

"Yes, sir. It is very lonely up that way, sir, with but few houses; and thinking there might have been something wrong to have caused the cries, I went up there to look about. On my way I met two lads who had been boating, and who had found the bonnet floating near the bank of the stream some distance above the bridge."

"She has been drowned!" murmured Josie West, with a half-subdued moan and sob.

"A hundred yards or more beyond," continued Mercer, "I found the hand-bag on the bank, and in the soil near by there were signs of a violent struggle."

"Footprints?"

"Yes, chief, and several scraps of cloth, as if torn from a girl's dress. I have them here, sir."

"They are like the waist Belle had on!" cried Josie West, half starting from her chair. "There is absolutely no doubt, Chief O'Mara, that my sister has been——"

"Pardon me, Miss West!" exclaimed the chief, with a slight frown. "Please allow me to question the officer without further interruption. It is very evident that the case is one which requires thorough investigation, and it shall have it. Did you examine the footprints, Mercer?"

"Very carefully, sir."

"What did you find?"

"The prints evidently were those of a man and girl, or young lady. In places they were quite plain. The girl wore a small shoe, that of the man was about an eight."

"What more?"

"I returned down river, sir, and on making inquiries I learned that a man and girl had been seen driving toward Dixon's road house about half-past eight last evening."

"Did you get any description?"

"Later, sir."

"Go on."

"I first hunted up the parties who had reported the fact that screams had been heard, and from them I learned that no effort had been made on their part to ascertain at the time the occasion for the outcries."

"Did they offer any explanation?"

"They said that the screams ceased almost immediately, and that they had supposed them to be the cries of boys, possibly, and had not thought it necessary to look into the matter."

"Who made these reports?"

"Two women, sir, who were passing along the road some distance away at the time the screams were heard."

"Did they state anything further?"

"Only that they saw a team driven rapidly by them a little later, from the direction in which the screams had been heard."

"Did you get a description of the team?"

"A sorrel horse and buggy, sir, driven by a man."

"Was there no other occupant in the carriage?"

"None that the women could see, sir."

"Which way was the man driving?"

"Toward the bridge, sir."

"Did he cross into Pittsburg?"

"The women could not say, sir. They were considerably above the bridge, and the team had quickly passed out of sight."

"What more have you done, Mercer?"

"I employed a boy to take me out to Dixon's road house, chief, and there continued my inquiries."

"That place doesn't enjoy a very good reputation, Mercer!" exclaimed Chief O'Mara, bluntly. "What did you find out there?"

"I learned that a man driving a sorrel horse came there just before nine last evening, and remained for more than an hour."

"Any companion?"

"A young lady," bowed Mercer. "The two had dinner in a private room, and were seen only by the waiter who served them."

"Did you question the waiter?"

"I did, chief."

"Did he know the man or girl by sight?"

"He did not. He described the man as being about fifty, slightly gray, and wearing a mustache only. He was well dressed and appeared like a man of means."

"The girl?"

"She was about twenty, of medium figure,

dark complexion, and quite pretty. She was stylishly dressed, and wore a silk waist of a pattern corresponding to the fragment I had found on the bank of the river a short time before."

"Did the waiter identify it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were there any names spoken in his hearing while he served them?"

"No, sir."

"What other facts, Mercer?"

"The girl carried the hand-bag, chief, which the waiter also remembered. And he also recognized the bonnet found by the two boys."

"What does the hand-bag contain?"

"Only a handkerchief and a pocketbook, chief," replied the officer, snapping the hasp and producing the articles mentioned. "But the pocketbook contains a little money, and several cards bearing the name——"

Again Patrolman Mercer cast a doubtful look at the girl who sat listening so intently to his every word, and again she gave him to understand that she did not desire her feelings spared by the suppression of any of the facts.

"Speak out, officer!" she cried, with considerable vehemence. "The name upon the card is"——

"Miss Belle West, miss," said Mercer, gravely bowing.

Josie West heard him without a change in her white face; but all could see that she was deeply affected, and that only by force of a strong and resolute will were her emotions subdued.

"My sister's name, Chief O'Mara! You see my impression was right," she added, with another betrayal of that bitterness which she several times had displayed. "I hope you will discover the knave who has so wronged her, and bring him to justice."

"We shall try to do so, Miss West," curtly

returned the chief. "What more have you learned, Mercer?"

"I made further inquiries at the road house, Chief O'Mara, but could find no one who had seen and recognized the man," replied the patrolman. "But while questioning the hostler, in whose care the team had been left while the parties were at dinner, I discovered the probable owner of the team."

"Good! How was that?"

"They have at Dixon's, sir, a fashion common enough with the road houses," explained Mercer.

"Well, go on."

"It is that of marking with a pencil on the bottom of a carriage the name of the stable from which it comes, when the hostler or groom can learn the fact without appearing too inquisitive. The hostler last night recognized the sorrel as being an animal that had been driven out to the road house on previous occasions, yet by different parties; and on examining the buggy he found that the name of the livery stable from which it was hired had previously been noted in the team."

"Then it was a let team?"

"The hostler thought so."

"And what name was penciled in the buggy?"

"That of the American stables, chief, on Center avenue."

"Have you been out there?"

"No, sir; I came here at once with this information."

And the officer fell back a step, like one who had concluded.

Chief O'Mara swung quickly about in his chair and rang up the telephone call with the desk instrument at his elbow.

It was a moment of intense excitement.

Every person present realized that the life of a man might hang upon the answer received over the wire.

The bitter and vengeful light in the eyes of Josie West was becoming brighter, and her lips had ceased quivering with emotion. But the paleness in the cheeks of her escort who still remained standing beside her chair, momentarily became very vivid. It was almost as if he, now, was about to faint.

At the end of sixty seconds, Chief O'Mara had the line required.

"Hello! The American stables, on Center avenue?"

The answer came promptly but they were heard by Chief O'Mara only.

"Yes; who are you?"

"O'Mara, chief of detectives! Did you let a buggy and sorrel horse to any person last evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"To whom?"

"To Mr. Dana Radcliff, the coal merchant."

The chief could hardly believe his ears. He felt there must be some mistake. Dana Radcliff was one of the wealthy Pittsburg coal merchants, and had a magnificent home in Allegheny, with a wife and several children.

What business had Dana Radcliff out riding and driving with a girl of two and twenty?

"Did you let more than one sorrel horse last evening?" demanded the chief.

"No, sir; we have only one sorrel among our let horses."

"At what time did the team go out?"

"About eight o'clock."

"And return?"

"Between eleven and twelve."

"Did the gentleman say where he had been?"

"He did not."

"Has he ever hired a team of you before?" asked Chief O'Mara, knowing well enough

that Radcliff had a score of teams of his own.

"On several occasions," was the reply.

"In the day or evening?"

"Always in the evening."

"That's all!" exclaimed the chief, ringing off the wire.

"Did you learn the villain's name, sir?" cried Josie West, leaning quickly forward with frowning eyes.

"I learned a name," said Chief O'Mara, curtly. "Perhaps it will be given to you a little later."

He arose with the last, and strode to one of the corners of the room. His face had become more grave, and the ring of austere determination had found place in his sonorous voice.

"Garrity, come here!" he commanded, quickly.

The inspector named instantly joined him.

Then the chief's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Go down to the office of Dana Radcliff, the coal merchant, Garrity," he said, with a significance instantly appreciated; "and see if he is there. If you find him, give him to understand that I wish to question him concerning a matter of which you know absolutely nothing, and ask him to accompany you here at once. Take a carriage."

"What if he declines to come, sir?"

The glow in the dark eyes of Chief O'Mara intensified.

"Bring him here just the same," he commanded, bluntly.

CHAPTER III.

BROUGHT TO THE RINGBOLT.

Five minutes later only two persons occupied Chief O'Mara's private office; the chief himself, and young Steve Manley.

The latter was seated at a table in one corner of the room, with a collection of docu-

ments and a block of blank paper before him. Any stranger would have supposed him to be merely an office boy, or a junior clerk.

This was precisely what Chief O'Mara intended.

Yet Steve was there to make notes of the expected interview.

In an adjoining room, the door of which was closed, were Patrolman Mercer and the several inspectors who had been present, together with Josie West and her escort, Sidney Barrows.

Every sign of what already had occurred in the chief's office had been removed, that Dana Radcliff, when he should appear, could receive no intimation of the occasion for Chief O'Mara's peremptory summons.

At the end of eight minutes the door was opened and the man came over the threshold.

Steve Manley did not so much as turn his head.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Radcliff," said Chief O'Mara, casually looking up from the desk at which he was seated, "Take a chair."

Dana Radcliff was an attractive man of fifty, with a good figure, a dignified bearing and an air of independence warranted by social distinction and a long bank account. He was reputed worth a million, and owned one of the finest dwellings in Allegheny. He had a wife and family who moved in the best circles of society, and his moral character was generally considered to be beyond reproach.

A few of his intimate friends who knew him best, however, could have testified to his fondness for pretty girls and harmless flirtations, of which his wife would by no means have approved, and to a certain crafty status of character which did not often show on the man's surface.

"Good-morning, O'Mara," he responded, with blunt familiarity. "What do you want of me, that you send an officer for me with a hack? Has any of my numerous clerks fallen under suspicion?"

"Hardly that! Take this chair, Mr. Radcliff."

"Thank you. What can I do for you?"

Chief O'Mara turned to face him more directly.

"You can tell me who the party is with whom you took dinner last evening at Dixon's road house," he answered, quickly.

Radcliff started and grew quite pale; yet even with the change he made a denial.

"Dixon's roadhouse!" he exclaimed. "I don't know of the place."

"It is out Millvale way."

"That's a new one on me."

"Then you were not out there last evening?"

"Surely not!"

"I am glad to hear it," said Chief O'Mara, quietly. "I have no doubt, then, that you can easily establish an alibi."

"An alibi!" cried Radcliff, more excitedly. "Good Heavens, sir! what do you mean? What has occurred to require this of me?"

Chief O'Mara ignored his vehement questions.

"I would suggest that you consider the answers you see fit to make me, Mr. Radcliff," he rejoined. "I have been informed that you were at Dixon's roadhouse last evening."

"It is false!"

"As I said before, I am very glad to hear it. Is it equally false, Mr. Radcliff, that you hired a team from the American stables and went to ride, having for a companion a young lady by the name of Belle West, who resides on Morningside avenue, near the Allegheny Cemetery. Pray, sir, consider for a moment before you reply."

The significance of what had been said was irresistible. Radcliff briefly hesitated. Though his cheeks were very pale, his eyes were now ablaze with resentment, and his stout figure tremulous with suppressed anger.

"Why do you question me thus?" he at length cried, hotly. "What is the meaning of these insinuations?"

"They are not insinuations, Mr. Radcliff," said Chief O'Mara, with more austerity. "They are allegations."

"They are presumptuous, sir!"

"Do you mean that you deny them?"

"Most assuredly, I do!"

"I am glad to hear it."

"Why are you glad?" cried Radcliff, passionately. "What do you imply by the repetition of that remark?"

"Merely that you are in a less serious position than I feared," Chief O'Mara answered deeply. "And as I said before, you doubtless can establish an alibi, if I am mistaken?"

"But what need of an alibi?"

"Aren't you acquainted with Belle West, Mr. Radcliff?"

Radcliff changed to a new course. He had brains enough to know that no ordinary matter would have occasioned this summons and interview. With lips still twitching with resentment, he now said curtly:

"I admit I am acquainted with Belle West. What of it?"

"How long have you known her, Mr. Radcliff?"

"For about two months."

"What have been your relations with her?"

"Only those of a friend!" cried Radcliff, sharply. "Look here, O'Mara, why do you meddle with this? What concern is it of yours, that I am acquainted with her? Has there been any complaint made to you?"

"Not exactly a complaint."

"What, then? Surely my wife has not heard of my——"

"Your what?" demanded Chief O'Mara, when the speaker abruptly curtailed his remark.

Radcliff forced a laugh to his lips, and shook his head.

"I suppose I can speak plainly to you, O'Mara, without its going farther!" he now cried, impulsively. "I'll admit I have been engaged in a harmless flirtation with Miss West; but nothing more than that, I assure you."

"Who is the girl?"

"She is one of two pretty sisters who live alone on Morningside avenue."

"What about their character?"

"Good enough, as far as I know."

"Yet not too good, evidently!"

"As you now might infer. Both of them are tolerably unconventional, and I ran across the younger one some time ago, and since I have enjoyed an innocent sort of relationship with her. Merely a dinner now and then, a drive into the country, a few presents, or the like of that."

"Has she been aware that you are a married man?"

"Indeed, yes!"

"Don't you know, Radcliff, that you have been taking long chances of your reputation?"

"Humph! It was very easy to buy the girl's silence, O'Mara," returned Radcliff, curtly. "She was willing enough to accept my gifts, and my money, even. I have kept her quiet enough, and what puzzles me is how the thing has leaked out. If my wife——"

"Your wife knows nothing about it."

"Why, then, do you meddle with it?" demanded Radcliff, sharply.

"Because, Mr. Radcliff," Chief O'Mara now sternly rejoined; "there has been evi-

dence produced here this morning, which seriously indicates that Belle West was murdered last evening and her body cast into the waters of the Allegheny. That is why I meddle. And that is why I wish to know whether she was your companion last evening."

For an instant Dana Radcliff sat like a man who scarce comprehended what had been said. Then he half rose from his chair, only to drop back again as if every muscle had suddenly relaxed and let him down. White as the linen at his throat, and with a voice that scarce was audible, he gasped sharply:

"Murdered! Belle West murdered! Oh, my God! it is not possible!"

"It is more! It is probable!"

"Then I——"

"Stop!" interrupted Chief O'Mara, quickly raising his hand with a forbidding gesture. "You now may be careful what you say, Mr. Radcliff. I give you warning that your words may hereafter be used against you."

"What! Am I under arrest?"

"You are under arrest, sir."

"Not charged with—with this crime!" gasped Radcliff, with eyes starting from his head.

"No charge has yet been made, but you will be detained in custody. After your denial of——"

"Wait, wait!" cried Radcliff, violently. "Use my statements as you will. I recall those denials, O'Mara. I admit I was with Belle West last evening, that I took her to ride and dined with her at Dixon's roadhouse. I now admit all that; but I deny any knowledge of such a tragedy as you disclose."

"Why did you lie at all about this?" demanded Chief O'Mara, sternly.

"Because I knew of nothing so serious in-

volved," Radcliff forcibly answered. "I aimed only to conceal a foolish flirtation, the doubtful escapade of a married man. My God, sir! do you imagine I would have come here like this, and lied about facts which any blockhead might easily establish, had I known what you since have disclosed? I tell you I know nothing about Belle West's death, if she indeed is dead. If it is a fact, my exposure is inevitable, and my reputation ruined at home and abroad. Great Scott! O'Mara it cannot be possible!"

"The evidence——"

"What evidence?" interrupted Radcliff, with an agitation utterly beyond his control. "Tell me on what such a frightful suspicion rests. Ask me any question you will, and I will answer it truthfully, and to the best of my knowledge. Merciful Heavens, O'Mara, this is terrible!"

Again the chief raised his hand and checked him.

"Compose yourself, Mr. Radcliff," he commanded. "Answer my questions."

"Ask any questions you wish, sir. I would make any sacrifice of money, if the truth can be learned and the disgrace threatening me averted."

"When a human life has been taken, a sacrifice of money doesn't avail," replied Chief O'Mara, sternly repelling the suggestion more manifest in Radcliff's burning eyes, than in the words he impulsively had spoken.

"At what time," he then demanded; "did you leave Dixon's roadhouse?"

"Between ten and eleven o'clock, sir."

"Was Belle West then with you?"

"Yes, sir, she was."

"Where did you last see her?"

"On the road a mile this side of Dixon's," said Radcliff, now tremulous with agitation.

"Do you mean that she left your carriage?"

"That is just what I mean, Chief O'Mara."

"What occasioned that?"

"We had an altercation over some trifling thing, and she became angry and refused to ride further with me. Before I could prevent her, she sprang out of the buggy and refused to enter it."

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Radcliff, that a girl of twenty left you in that deserted locality, with a long walk home staring her in the face, to say nothing of the possibility of affronts on the way, and all because of some trifling altercation?"

The sternness with which Chief O'Mara asked the question at once revealed that he had not credited the explanation which had been made.

Radcliff's white cheeks colored deeply, then grew paler than ever.

"I have told you the truth, Chief O'Mara!" he cried, desperately. "I confess that the statement seems incredible, but I swear it is the truth."

"Did you hold any discussion with Belle West after she left your carriage?"

"Only for a moment, sir. I begged her to get in with me again, and to allow me to take her at least as far as the bridge."

"And she refused?"

"Positively."

"Were there any dwellings near?"

"Not any for a quarter-mile."

"Were there any witnesses to this scene?"

"None of whom I know. Would to God there were!"

"What happened next?" demanded Chief O'Mara, with no favorable change in his stern countenance. "Did you leave Miss West standing in the road?"

"I did not leave her, sir!" cried Radcliff. "She left me, instead, and suddenly started back in the direction from which we had come."

"Toward the roadhouse?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you then do, Mr. Radcliff?"

"My impulse was to leave the carriage and follow her, in the hope of prevailing upon her to comply with my wish. I was greatly averse to leaving a girl in such a deserted place at that hour of the night."

"Did you act upon that impulse?"

"No, sir. After brief consideration I turned about, instead of leaving the carriage, and drove back in search of her. My search proved vain. I don't know where she went. I drove nearly back to the roadhouse, but I could not find her."

"How far from the river is the spot where she left you?"

"Not more than two hundred yards, sir."

"Have you any further statements to make, Mr. Radcliff?"

"There is no further statement that I can make!" cried Radcliff, in despair. "I could not find the girl. I spent half an hour in the effort. At the end of that time, I turned about again and drove home."

"Did you at any time hear an outcry of any kind?"

"I did not."

"Did you see any person, man or woman, in that locality?"

"No, sir, I did not."

"Yet there were two persons about there who heard screams, Mr. Radcliff, and who saw your team," said Chief O'Mara, with grave austerity, "and, in light of evidence produced this morning, I have no alternative but to hold you under arrest."

Radcliff sprang to his feet with a cry.

"I'll not suffer it!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "My God, sir! this is outrageous. I am innocent of any wrong done this girl. I will not suffer arrest. I——"

"Mr. Radcliff!"

"I will not submit to it, sir! You have no warrant for——"

But Chief O'Mara had touched a bell upon his desk.

The door at the end of the office flew open and two policemen stood on the threshold.

"Possibly no warrant, Mr. Radcliff," said the chief. "But that will be forthcoming, sir, and, meantime, you will consider yourself in custody."

CHAPTER IV.

STEVE GETS AN ASSIGNMENT.

Contrary to general expectation, and despite the efforts made to recover it, the dark waters of the Allegheny did not give up the dead body of murdered Belle West.

In the opinion of the police, and that of a startled and censorious public, however, this scarce was needed to complete the fatal network of circumstantial evidence that had involved Dana Radcliff and cast him into a prison cell.

For nearly a week the press throughout the country pictured under glaring headlines and with vivid illustrations the knavery of the Pittsburg society man who cruelly had made way with the beautiful orphan girl whom he had wronged; and not for a month did the local papers cease upbraiding the dual life which had been led by wealthy and respected Dana Radcliff, nor from urging that justice should speedily make an example of him.

From comparative obscurity, the name of the West girls sprang into notoriety in a night. There were some who spoke ill of them, but with vague hints only, and these voices were drowned by those which extolled their virtues.

Two weeks after the crime, however, Josie West again startled the local community by being quietly married to Mr. Sidney Barrows in the chapel of the Methodist Episcopal church. And the sewing-machine agent forthwith relinquished his lodgings in Dearborn street and took up his abode in the home of his young and beautiful wife.

To a reporter, who called to learn if any special occasion existed for so early a marriage after her sister's death, Josie politely informed that she was utterly alone in her home, that she no longer could impose upon

the kindness of neighbors to relieve her solitude and sadness, and that the marriage had been hastened only to obviate these conditions.

And everybody expressed sympathy for her, and said that the marriage was quite right.

And absolutely nobody dreamed for a moment that it was all wrong!

Meantime, Dana Radcliff grew gray in a prison cell, and the network of evidence against him became stronger as the day of his trial approached. The circumstances already presented were augmented by further incriminating details, and the discovery that the footprints made upon the river bank on the night of the crime corresponded precisely to the boots worn by Radcliff that night. Despite his protestations of innocence, for he cleaved stoutly to the story told Chief O'Mara, the general opinion was strong against him, and that his ultimate conviction was inevitable.

"My own lawyer states that I have only a bare fighting chance of acquittal," he sadly observed to Chief O'Mara, who was calling on him one morning just a week before the day fixed for his trial.

"But, O'Mara," he hastened to add, with intense feeling, "though I were to swing for this, I shall protest with my last breath my absolute innocence of Belle West's death, and my complete ignorance concerning it. You may take that for the solemn statement of a dying man, Chief O'Mara, and a man whose soul will say the same thing in the presence of God Almighty!"

Chief O'Mara did not reply to this, yet the fervor of the man had more than once impressed him.

"Who is the party, Radcliff," he asked, instead, "who lately intimated to you that you might possibly escape conviction by availing yourself of a flaw which he suspected to exist in the government's case?"

"His name is Michael Kirk."

"Is he a lawyer?"

"It was so stated on the card he sent up to me."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him," said Radcliff, with some of his former dignity briefly lifting him above

his fearful humiliation, "that I did not care to escape the law, nor to accept liberty in that way, even if the way existed. No, O'Mara, I will return to the world legally acquitted of this crime, or I shall bless that seclusion from the world which the walls of a prison afford me. I dismissed the man almost immediately."

"Did he offer any other reason for calling?"

"Other reason?"

"I mean, Radcliff, did he make any suggestion indicating that he wished to bargain with you for his information?"

"He remarked, I remember, that he thought he could pull me out of the scrape, providing I would make it an object."

"And you then asked him in what way?"

"Quite naturally, I did."

"And he stated that he thought he had discovered some flaw in the government's case, did he?"

"Precisely."

"Whereupon you dismissed him with the reply stated?"

"I did so, at once, O'Mara."

"Did he show any disappointment at your cold reception of his offer?"

"Not that I observed."

"Have you still got his card?"

"I have it here."

"Allow me to look at it!" exclaimed the chief, quite brusquely.

It was a modest bit of pasteboard, that which Dana Radcliff drew from his pocket and with tremulous hand tendered his caller, and it bore only the words:

MICHAEL KIRK,
Attorney. Rexford Building.

Chief O'Mara returned to his office at headquarters in a very thoughtful frame of mind. For all of half an hour after taking his customary seat he sat staring vacantly at his desk, with his dark brows knit to a frown above his intent eyes, and with his powerful figure motionless, save for the steady rise and fall of his broad chest. At the end of thirty minutes he rang a call to the outer office.

The summons was answered by young Steve Manley.

"You happen to be the one I wish to see, Steve," said the chief, when the young detective appeared on the threshold. "Come in here and close the door. I have something to say to you."

"All right, chief!" cried Steve, promptly.

And he secretly hoped to receive some assignment more important than those of petty larceny and the like; for nearly six weeks had passed since the famous murder case in which he so signally had distinguished himself, and nearly lost his life.

"It relates to this West girl affair," continued Chief O'Mara, when Steve approached; "and I have quite a delicate piece of work I want done, which perhaps may be more easily accomplished by one of your years, Steve, than by an older officer."

"Let her slide, Chief O'Mara," said Steve, eagerly.

"Note me carefully, then and keep my information to yourself."

"Bet your life on that, sir."

"I lately have taken it into my head that Radcliff, despite the circumstantial evidence against him, may not be guilty of taking Belle West's life," Chief O'Mara continued. "If he deliberately plotted to kill the girl, he certainly made a very bad job of it, in that he left himself open to suspicion. If, on the other hand, he committed the crime upon impulse that night, the letter left by Belle West is curiously inconsistent, in that it indicates that Radcliff had given her to understand that he had arranged to leave Pittsburgh with her that night, of which I can find no evidence at all. The two propositions do not hitch."

"Gee, they don't; that's right," said Steve, attentively.

"I am giving you these points, Steve, that you may better appreciate the bare possibilities of the case, and be governed by them in the work I shall assign you."

"I've got them O. K., Chief O'Mara."

"It is barely possible, keep in mind, that Radcliff may be the victim of some very shrewd and well-executed plot, designed with some object yet to be discovered."

"Some cuss after his dough?"

"If that is indeed so," replied the chief,

"there is but little time left before his trial in which to get at the truth."

"Here's where Lightning Willy gets in his fine work!" murmured Steve to himself.

"Now note my instructions," said Chief O'Mara, earnestly. "A man lately has called upon Radcliff in prison, and has intimated that he can pull him out of his scrape, and would do it for a money consideration."

"Well, say, what is he—a magician?" asked Steve, with a grin.

"No," laughed the chief; "he hinted at some flaw in the government's case. I happen to know that this is strong enough to stand alone, however, and hence I am led to suspect that this lawyer, whose name is Michael Kirk, may have some other iron in the fire than that of a flaw in the government's case."

"Sure! It's up to him to make his little speech, and tell us where he comes in on the crime," cried Steve, excitedly.

"Or the plot," said Chief O'Mara, pointedly. "So bear in mind that, if there is such a plot, there probably has been no murder committed. For Kirk would not so seriously have incriminated himself for the purpose of attempting any doubtful scheme."

"Not on your life, Chief O'Mara. So Belle West may be alive?"

"I don't mean precisely that, Steve. She may have committed suicide?"

"But——"

"Wait one moment! If Radcliff is the victim of a conspiracy, which still is only a bare possibility, this man Kirk, who now comes forward with an offer to save him, may know more of what occurred on the river bank that night than we do. If he has any way of saving Radcliff other than that suggested by him, I wish to discover what it is."

"What's the game, chief?"

"I want you to look up this man; here is his card, and see what you can learn about him."

"Yes, sir."

"Watch his movements closely for the next few days, and see that nothing escapes your notice. Observe what happens, where he goes, and with whom he has relations. And take heed that you accomplish this without giving him suspicion."

"That's me, Chief O'Mara."

"Do it, then, and report to me."

"When shall I report, chief?"

The latter made a characteristic answer.

"When you have anything worth reporting."

"All right! Here goes!" exclaimed Steve, with youthful assurance. "If Mr. Michael Kirk really knows anything about this crime, sir, I'll get next to it, and that's no joke."

"Take heed, however, that you get into no such perilous scrape as you did with Bill Rohan," said Chief O'Mara, bluntly. "I may not be on hand a second time."

Steve laughed, and turned to go.

Could he have foreseen the events of the next few days, however, he would not have had a laugh in order.

CHAPTER V.

A NIGHT MEETING.

Steve had no difficulty in locating Michael Kirk, and he found upon inquiry that this lawyer had appeared in Pittsburg only a few months before, and established himself in a commodious office in the Rexford building.

He found Kirk to be a man apparently in the forties, tall and angular in figure, and with a dark, cadaverous face. The latter was lighted by a pair of crafty black eyes, so sunken under their bushy brows that they looked like two bright little balls surrounded by darkness. As may be imagined, he was not a prepossessing man.

He appeared to be a man of means, however, and occupied a well-appointed office; and Steve found upon investigation that, by availing himself of the window of a corridor in a rear building, he could look across a rear court and through the window of Kirk's office.

For two days the young detective kept this man under constant surveillance, but his vigilance resulted in no discovery of importance. Kirk came and went occasionally, but he held no intercourse with parties, either in his office or outside, and, to all intents and purposes, he appeared like a lawyer without clients.

On the morning of the third day, however, Steve discovered him upon the street, evi-

dently bent upon some important mission. It took him to the prison, to which he easily obtained admission, and for nearly half an hour Steve waited for him to emerge, satisfied that he again had called upon Dana Radcliff.

The expression on Kirk's face when he again appeared on the street was that of a man bitterly disappointed, and in corresponding ill-humor. Walking with the nervous haste of one mentally excited, he returned to his office.

Steve hastened around to the rear building, and soon gained his point of observation.

He discovered Kirk seated at his desk, with his coat and hat thrown off, and his attention engaged by a letter he was hurriedly writing. At the end of a few minutes the man sealed and addressed his communication, then abruptly sprang up and went to an electric appliance on the wall near the office door.

"That's for a messenger boy!" said Steve, instantly. "Well, say, what will I be doing while that messenger boy goes along with that love letter in his hand!" and Steve edged off, resolved in his mind to get hold of the letter, if it took a leg.

By a lively sprint downstairs and around corners, Steve reached the entrance of the Rexford building at the end of half a minute, and by chance he encountered a policeman on the sidewalk near by.

"Say, officer, look here a minute!" he cried, catching the patrolman by the arm.

"What's up?" demanded the policeman, regarding him with surprise.

"Nothing's up yet, but keep your eyes peeled!" exclaimed Steve. "Come in here a minute, will you?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Steve Manley, see, and I am working up a case for Chief O'Mara," Steve hurriedly explained, and, quickly drawing back his coat, he displayed his badge.

"You are not the kid who ran Bill Rohan down, are you?" demanded the officer.

"That's what, and this is another hot case. Come off the street, will you?"

This put a new complexion on the request, and now the officer readily accompa-

nied Steve into the corridor of the Rexford building.

"What are you on now?" he demanded.

"Mum's the word, officer; the boss might kick," Steve hurriedly rejoined. "A messenger boy will come along in a minute. Somebody called for him. A party upstairs has a letter to be delivered, and I'm on to the job, understand?"

"Ah, I see!"

"I've got to get the messenger boy's uniform, see, whether it fits or not," said Steve. "You know boys, and like-as not he'll try to get gay with me. I could get it all right if I put up a fight with him for it, but that wouldn't go, do you see? I want you to come in on the deal and make him exchange suits with me."

"Go ahead—I'll lend a hand," replied the officer, bluntly. "Where can you change clothes?"

"Right here in the corridor," laughed Steve. "You are big enough and broad enough to block the way, ain't you?"

"I guess that's right. And I'll close the street door against intruders."

"Wait until the messenger shows up."

"Here he is now!"

By good luck the messenger boy was about Steve's size, and after a brief explanation he consented to comply with the request, and to wait in an adjoining hotel until Steve returned from his mission.

Less than five minutes after Michael Kirk rang the call, Steve Manley, attired in the messenger's uniform, appeared at the door of the lawyer's office.

"Come in here, boy!" cried Kirk, with a sharp, rasping voice. "Do you know where Morningside avenue is?"

"Sure, sir, since it's my biz to know!" cried Steve, promptly.

"I want you to take a letter out there."

"Right, sir."

"Wait for an answer, and bring it directly back here, mind you."

"Sure thing, sir," cried Steve.

"Here's the letter. Can you read the name?"

"Sure! Mr. Sidney Barrows."

"Look sharp, then, for I shall wait here till you return."

"I'll do my prettiest, boss."

"Wait one moment!" Kirk sharply cried, as Steve turned to go. "If Mr. Barrows is not at home, ask his wife where he is."

"Yes, sir."

"And tell her to give him the letter the moment he returns, and say to him that I shall expect him to follow its directions. Can you remember that?"

"What kind of a kid do you think I am?" returned Steve, curtly. "Of course I can remember it!"

"Be off, then!"

But Steve did not immediately visit Morningside avenue. He was taking no chances of being recognized by the man and girl who possibly had noticed him in the chief's office on the morning following the crime.

Taking a cab, he first hastened home, and made a change sufficient to preclude recognition; and he startled the Jehu by appearing at the end of five minutes with his hair turned to a crushed strawberry hue, and with no end of freckles adorning his roseate countenance.

"Begob, but you're not the same kid as went in, be ye?" he cried, when Steve dashed out and down the steps.

"Go to the head, cabby!" cried Steve, laughing. "Say, take me to Morningside avenue on the run, see, and drop me around the corner nearest the West's."

"Faith, an' I'll do that, me bye!"

Ten minutes later Steve rang the bell at the West dwelling, and waited an answer.

The house was quite a pretentious wooden residence, with a broad piazza front and side, and a deep yard, with flower-beds and several fruit trees. The adjoining dwellings were somewhat removed by the surrounding grounds, and the indications were that West had been a man of at least comfortable means.

Steve waited some time before his ring was answered; and once he thought he detected a movement of the lace draperies at one of the parlor windows, as if some person was peering out to survey the waiting caller before responding.

Then the door was opened by the pale-faced sewing-machine agent, whom Steve had seen in the chief's office with Josie West.

"Mr. Barrows, sir?" cried Steve, inquiringly.

"Yes."

Before Barrows had finished reading the missive, the voice of Josie West, or Josie Barrows, as she now must be called, was heard from within the hall.

"What is it, Sidney?"

"Ah, there! They don't seem dead easy over this," thought Steve, watching the doubtful expression on Barrows' delicate face.

The latter turned and partly closed the door before replying, yet Steve heard him rejoin:

"A note from Mr. Kirk, Josie."

"What does he want?"

"He wishes me to meet him to-night at—wait a bit, dear! I will show it to you later."

Then Barrows again opened the door and said to Steve:

"Are you to return to the party who sent this?"

"Yes, sir, right away."

"Tell him I will be there, as requested. There is no need of writing it."

"Not a bit, sir! I'll tell him you will be—where, sir?" inquired Steve, innocently.

"He'll know where!" exclaimed Barrows, with a quick frown showing about his luminous dark eyes, as if he resented any inquisitive sentiment on the part of the messenger. "Just say to him that I will be there."

"Right, sir!" cried Steve, touching his cap and turning down the steps.

"And I'll be there, too!" Steve said to himself, as he hastened back to the cab awaiting him around a near corner.

"It's long odds that Chief O'Mara has hit the nail on the head!" he further reasoned during his return ride. "Or why the deuce are these people and this lawyer, who claims he can pull Radcliff out of his trouble, so close with each other? On the face of it, Josie West don't want Radcliff pulled out of this scrape; and if Kirk really comes this game, it is odds of a hundred to one that there's some secret scheme between them."

"And it's equal odds that I ferret out the

scheme!" Steve concluded, with a determination quite equal to the occasion.

He was not obliged to return to his lodgings for the purpose of removing his disguise; he accomplished that in the cab. And at the end of rather more than the half-hour stated he again appeared at the office of Michael Kirk, and delivered Barrows' message.

"You've been gone long enough," snarled the lawyer, when paying him the customary fee. "I ought to owe you this for a time, on the same principle.

"Is that so?" retorted Steve, indifferently. "It's easy to get even."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Try it and see!"

Kirk glared sharply at him from out his sunken eyes for a moment, then dropped the coins into Steve's extended hand.

"Don't try being fresh with me, youngster!" he said, warningly. "If you do, you will get the worst of it."

"I'd take my chances," returned Steve, as he shot out through the door.

A run to the hotel, and another quick change with the genuine messenger, were speedily accomplished; and Steve then settled down to watch Kirk until he made his next move. It was very evident that the lawyer had arranged a meeting with Barrows that evening, and Steve had no idea of losing sight of him before that meeting occurred.

He felt that he could not take time even to return and report to Chief O'Mara.

At five o'clock Kirk left his office and went to his hotel to dinner, which gave Steve also a chance to dine.

It came dark about eight in the evening; but not until a half-hour later did Kirk set forth from the hotel, evidently upon the mission for which Steve vigilantly had watched and waited.

Just as the city clocks were striking nine the lawyer arrived at a small, isolated boat-house on the bank of the Allegheny, some distance above the Forty-third street bridge, and on the bank opposite that on which the crime had been committed.

Steve was not far behind him, yet was

compelled to be exceedingly careful in order to escape observation.

"Here's a go!" he thought, on observing the scene; "hang it if I don't think this fellow does know most about the little game on that further bank that night, just as the boss suspects! It would have been dead easy to have slipped over there in a boat. Like as not he put Belle West out of the way himself."

"Hello! there's Barrows!"

The latter exclamation was caused by seeing the sewing-machine agent's slight figure appear on the river bank fifty feet away. Both men were only dimly discernible standing there, with their figures outlined against the darker background; yet Steve could see plainly enough that they were shaking hands.

"Friends!" he muttered. "Hang it! I wish I could get near enough to overhear them."

To attempt this, however, was to take too long a chance of disobeying Chief O'Mara's instructions. It would have been impossible to have approached nearer without being discovered.

For a quarter-hour the two men stood nearly motionless, engaged in subdued and earnest conversation.

Then Steve was struck by an idea.

"Barrows will surely tell his wife all about this meeting just as soon as he returns home," he said to himself. "If I can get into their house on the quiet before he gets home I may learn the whole business. It's worth a try, all right, all right, and I'll make it!"

He did not wait to see if the men parted. Leaving them still standing on the river bank, he started off post haste in the direction of the West dwelling.

CHAPTER VI.

CALLED DOWN.

Scarce a sound broke the night silence of Morningside avenue when Steve Manley arrived near the West residence.

The neighboring dwellings were in darkness and their inmates in bed; the long avenue was well-nigh deserted; and a stillness

like that of the great cemetery in the near distance surrounded these abodes of the living.

Even the West dwelling itself appeared as silent as a tomb. Yet a dim light burned in one of the lower side rooms, evidently a library, and was faintly reflected into the deep hall.

Resuming his exceeding caution as he approached the house, Steve briefly waited and watched outside the yard, intent upon learning just where Josie Barrows might be at that moment.

The dimness of the light in the library indicated that she might be absent from the house, or possibly had retired for the night, leaving the lamp for her husband on his return.

"I must get in there before he shows up," thought Steve. "And that may be any minute."

Seeing nothing to alarm him, he vaulted the front fence and entered the yard. His feet fell noiselessly on the greensward, and the gloom under the trees was sufficient to hide him from view. As he neared the rear of the yard he made a discovery.

The lower half of the rear library window had been left wide open to admit the air of the soft May night.

"Here's luck! That's as good as a door," thought Steve. "But it looks as if the woman was in the house."

He stole nearer and looked into the dimly-lighted room.

It was vacant.

Not a sound broke the silence within.

"She's abed for sure," decided Steve. "I'll take the chance. The boss won't blame me for this. It's too good a chance to learn the whole game."

He sat down in the grass near by and quickly removed his shoes, hanging them about his neck by the laces.

Then he was ready to enter the house.

Josie Barrows was not in bed, however.

True, she had lowered the light and opened the rear window; but only to withdraw from the room in which she had been reading, to sit in the darkness at one of the front windows, and there watch for Barrows' return.

Her vigil was rewarded, but not by the person she expected.

It was one of Steve's strokes of ill-luck that she saw him approach, saw him cautiously scrutinize the house, and finally scale the fence and disappear into the yard.

The effect upon the girl was electrical. She started suddenly up, darted into the library, and secured a revolver from one of the table drawers.

A moment more and she was back of the parlour portières, standing there in the semi-darkness like a statue of marble, with her face as white as the chaste stone, but with her burning eyes aglow, her every nerve tense as steel, and her gaze bent upon the open window of the library.

Thus she stood and waited, scarce breathing, with her tall figure drawn erect, and with the glittering weapon poised in her steady white hand.

Only a woman of superior courage, or a woman inspired by the realization of some desperate emergency, could so have met such a situation.

A minute passed.

Then Steve appeared at the open window and came silently over the sill.

"It's that young detective!" was the thought in Josie Barrows' mind the instant she beheld his face.

Life and death were never nearer one another than at that moment; for the girl's finger was fairly pressing the trigger of the weapon, and she knew that the law, the courts, and the world would hold her blameless for a life taken thus.

Yet the finger weakened under the horror of the mind that governed it; and—then it was too late.

Steve had alighted like a cat upon the library floor, and slipped noiselessly into the hall.

Moving with equal silence, Josie Barrows stepped beyond the portière and hid in the library.

Steve glanced into the parlour by the hall door, and observed that it was vacant.

"She's upstairs," he decided. "If she's abed, even, I must be near enough to overhear when her husband returns."

Then he started up the hall stairs. Josie Barrows prepared to follow him.

It was a game of hide and seek—but thus far the girl had the best of it.

Steve mounted to the hall above, and there discovered the faint gleam of a dim light in one of the side chambers. He stole softly to the open door and looked in.

"A sleeping room! This is their room—Barrows' and his wife's. But where's the girl, I'd like to know?"

With these thoughts passing through his mind he stepped over the threshold and glanced curiously at the littered chiffonière and at the snowy coverlid of the empty bed.

Then, as his eyes were lifted again, he suddenly beheld in the mirror nearly opposite him the reflection of a figure that momentarily chilled his every drop of blood.

It was the motionless figure of Josie Barrows, standing on the threshold of the door, with her revolver aimed point blank at his back.

Though it took about all his nerve to prevent it, Steve Manley checked a self-betrayal. Fairly under the muzzle of the girl's weapon, which at any moment might belch forth his death, Steve without turning let his hand fall toward his hip pocket.

Then Josie Barrows' voice, as sharp and sibilant as the hiss of a snake, suddenly broke the silence.

"Stop!" she cried. "If you attempt to draw a weapon, I'll fire! You're watching me in the mirror, and you know that I can execute my threat. Turn around and hold up your hands!"

It was a great relief to Steve to know that she did not contemplate shooting at once. He turned about as commanded, and lifting his hands as high as his breast, he said, coolly:

"Ah, there you are, Mrs. Barrows! I wondered where you were."

"Well, you've found out!"

"That's right," laughed Steve. "You've called me down in the proper style."

Yet he was watching sharply for a chance to turn the tables on her; but the look on the girl's white face warned him against indiscretion, and not for an instant did the aim

of her weapon deviate from the very centre of his breast.

"Why are you here?" she demanded, with suppressed intensity.

"That's what I'd like to have you tell me," rejoined Steve, dryly. "Say, look out that you don't press too hard on that trigger, please, or you may hurt me."

"If I kill you, the law will acquit me."

"That's too true for a joke," said Steve, curtly.

"And I'll do it, if I'm forced to it."

"You look it, and that's no merry bar-room jest."

"Tell me why you are here."

"I saw the window open, so I thought I'd drop in and see what I could find worth taking."

"That's a lie!"

"Is it?"

"You're not a thief, but a detective."

"Is that so? Who do you think I am?"

"You are one of those I saw at the police headquarters on the morning after my sister's murder."

"You're a wise one, aren't you?" laughed Steve.

"Tell me the truth!" again commanded the girl, with bitter vehemence. "Why have you entered this house?"

Steve now began to see what she was after. If there was, indeed, a conspiracy, of which he now had no doubt, she was aiming to learn just what design had brought him there, and in how far the truth was known or suspected by the detectives.

Since he was fairly discovered, and denials useless, Steve determined to seize the bull by the horns.

"I am here to see your husband," he replied, still watching for the slightest chance to catch her off guard.

But Josie Barrows was not to be caught napping, and the opportunity did not come.

"To have a talk with my husband!" she cried. "For what purpose?"

"Oh, just to see what he has to do with a certain party by the name of Kirk," said Steve, bluntly.

"Don't you already know?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be here, and you can gamble on that."

For an instant, even in the dim light of the chamber, a gleam of satisfaction and triumph was discernible in Josie Barrows' brilliant eyes. She evidently felt that there had been nothing definite discovered by the detective, and this assumption was made the more plausible by Steve's presence there under such circumstances.

"My husband has no business with such a man," she now cried, sharply.

"Is that why he met him on the river bank to-night?" demanded Steve, with a laugh.

"You know of that!"

"Get wise, get wise. I was there and saw them."

"And you came here in order to learn what my husband might disclose on his return!" cried Josie, now guessing the truth.

"That's just the size of it," nodded Steve.

As he did so, he caught sight of the chandelier. It was directly above his head. If he could extinguish the gas, they would be on an equal footing in the darkness.

But he did not hurry.

"Well, you'll not make the discovery you hoped," the girl quickly replied, not observing his upward glance.

"That's where you're off your trolley."

"You'll find I'm not. I have you at my mercy."

"Well, I'm not finding any fault with that," laughed Steve, constantly watching her. "I don't want to go before your husband comes home. We can have a pleasant little chat, then, the three of us."

"You may not find it so pleasant," sneered the girl, with a threatening flash of her resentful eyes.

"You're a mind reader, aren't you?" replied Steve, lightly.

"And you certainly will discover nothing to account for your outrageous entrance into my house," she returned, without noticing his remark; "and if there's any law—stop! don't dare lower your hands!"

"What will you do?"

"I'll shoot, as surely as God hears me!" was the reply, in tones tremulous with bitter resolution.

"There must be a pretty good reason for such a bloodthirsty resolve," observed Steve, with dry significance.

The girl further resented the insinuation. "If there is!" she cried sharply, "you'll not live to discover it, nor to disclose what has passed between us."

"You're wrong again, my dear!" laughed Steve.

"You'll find I'm not, and that I mean what I say; if you move your hands toward your pockets," she retorted, quickly.

"My hands?" echoed Steve. "Rats! I just as lief oblige a lady, even at a revolver's muzzle. I'll hold my hands as high as the ceiling, Mrs. Barrows, if you say the word."

But he did not wait for her to say it. The fall of heavy steps, plainly sounding from the wooden veranda below, came to both of their ears, and told them that Barrows was at that moment returning.

With the last words still on his lips, Steve raised both hands above his head, and almost instantly turned off the gas.

Then he dropped like a flash, lest Josie Barrows should fire.

But what occurred was the very opposite of what Steve had expected.

With a low cry, with a movement as swift and violent as that of an angry leopard, she sprang at Steve through the darkness, as if resolved that he by no means should effect an escape in which her own safety might be seriously involved.

They met at the very moment Steve rose to his feet.

The collision was so sudden and violent that both lost their balance, and both pitched sidewise to the bed, near which Steve had been standing.

The violence of their fall caused something to break with a sharp snap. Then the bed itself, with both in it, rose into the air; and Steve Manley instantly realized their startling peril.

For it was one of those death-traps of man's ingenuity—a folding-bed!

CHAPTER VII.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

The situation was desperate.

The instant the bed began to close, Steve made a violent wriggle to escape.

The attempt proved vain. Josie Barrows

was in his way, also struggling wildly to extricate herself.

The result was that neither succeeded in escaping from the closing jaws of the domestic monster. Within that moment, for the entire episode had required but a moment, both were seriously penned in the nearly closed bed, with their feet luckily toward the floor, and their arms still entwined in the struggle which had instantly followed the unexpected calamity.

They could breathe; but to move was next to impossible; and to force open the bed and extricate themselves was utterly beyond their power.

Yet Steve quickly managed to twine one arm over the shoulder of the girl now so hopelessly crushed in his embrace, and she felt his hand steal suddenly around her neck.

"Not a sound!" he commanded softly, yet with a severity not wisely to have been ignored. "Don't you cry or speak a loud word, or you'll be sorry for it. By your own threat you've put your life in danger, and I mean what I say! If you betray me, I'll strangle you before they can release us!"

Josie Barrows was trembling violently, but till then only her breath, forced and strained, had issued from her lips.

"Let go!" she now gasped, wildly. "My God! we shall both die here!"

"You will, unless you do as I say!" Steve whispered sternly, now resolved to play the game up to its top limit. "If you make a sound to betray us, I'll kill you! Silence! the street door is being opened."

The sound of a key noisily thrust into a lock had reached the ears of both. Even in the brief time required by Sidney Barrows to find his door key, the scene between Steve and Josie Barrows had culminated as described. The next moment the street door was thrown open, and heavy footsteps and voices in the lower hall told that Sidney Barrows had not returned home alone.

Then the door closed with a bang, and a cry from Barrows sounded through the house.

"Josie! Hello, Josie! Where the dickens are you?"

The girl felt Steve's hand close harder about her throat, and a single whispered

phrase, intense in its threatening austerity, sounded in her ear.

"Silence, if you value your life!"

She felt the furious beating of his heart against her own, and the peril of the situation was more than she dared disregard. With a low gasp, she said, faintly:

"Let go! Don't hold me so. I'll be silent."

Yet she could not but realize the exposure her silence invited, and that this young detective now was resolved to hear at least what these two men would say under these circumstances.

"It's a case of close quarters here, and another call down at the finish," thought Steve; "but I'll get the truth, if it's to be had, and trust to luck for the rest."

Again the voice of Barrows rose up the stairs.

"Josie, Josie, are you up there?"

"She more likely has gone out!" exclaimed a voice which Steve recognized to be that of Michael Kirk. "She wouldn't have gone to bed and left that window wide open."

"But where can she have gone at this hour of the night?" returned Barrows, impatiently.

"Into one of the neighbor's, possibly."

"Nonsense, the neighbors are abed. She said she'd wait here until I returned. You don't imagine that any discovery has been made, and that she has been arrested on suspicion, do you?"

"Absurd!" cried Kirk, harshly. "You have not the sand of an hour-glass. How can any discovery have been made?"

"Don't be ugly to me, Michael Kirk, for I'll not stand it," retorted Barrows, sharply. "Your offer made Radcliff may have caused suspicion. The police are not fools, and you yourself said Radcliff appeared to have misgivings."

"Suppose he did! He cannot prove anything, nor escape from the fate threatening him. I know what I am about."

"Perhaps he knows, also. If he had no suspicion, it seems to me he would have taken up your offer."

"He will take it up fast enough, before he will suffer conviction," returned Kirk, in tones of vicious assurance. "We may be

compelled to shade the figure, but we will yet land him for a good round sum, you take my word for it."

"I've been taking your word till I am tired of——"

"Oh, look about and see if Josie is here," interrupted Kirk, with angry patience. "We may as well settle for good and all who is to run this game. I am also tired of hearing your cowardly misgivings. When Josie shows up I'll make sure of one thing, that we come to a final understanding."

It now was evident to Steve that some dissension resulted from the meeting on the river bank, and that this was the occasion of Kirk's return with Barrows. Both were in decided ill-humor, moreover, and Steve was quite aware that his situation was not encouraging.

But the discoveries he already had made were worth the venture.

"I'll see if she's abed!" Barrows now cried, impatiently. "She may be sound asleep."

"Rouse her up, if she is, and bring her down here," was Kirk's surly response, as Barrows started up the stairs.

"Now the music begins again," thought Steve, holding fast to the girl in his arms. "You keep quiet, mind you!" he added, in her ear.

"You don't expect——"

"Silence!"

The next moment Barrows entered the chamber, muttering sullenly under his breath. Then he shouted down the stairs:

"She's not up here. She always leaves a light. Besides, the bed isn't down."

"Light the gas!" cried Kirk, from the foot of the stairs. "She may have left a note for you."

Steve heard him searching for the match holder, all the while talking impatiently in his throat, and then a blaze of light suddenly filled the room.

Josie Barrows continued silent, but she was trembling like a leaf; yet Steve already had decided that only a cur and a coward would have harmed her under such circumstances.

Then Sidney Barrows caught sight of the revolver Josie had dropped to the floor,

"By thunder! What does this mean?" he cried, loudly. "Kirk! Kirk! come up here!"

"What's wrong!" cried the startled lawyer, even while he rushed up the stairs.

"I don't know. Here's our revolver on the floor——"

"Good heavens, look at that bed!" interrupted Kirk, as he entered. "It's not entirely closed, and the——"

"Look into it, instead!" Steve now cried, boldly. "And if you don't mind, kindly throw it down and let us get out."

"It's that messenger boy!" cried Kirk, when the two men recovered from their surprise. "By heavens! I didn't like that kid's look and remark when I paid——. Take hold of that side, will you, and help me throw down the infernal thing. Are you turned to stone?"

As for Michael Kirk, he certainly seemed turned to a very devil by the discovery of Steve's presence, and the possibilities involved; and only his harsh command, and the ugly look on his cadaverous face were needed to bring Barrows to himself.

Springing to the opposite side of the bed, he was about to help Kirk throw it down, when the latter again cried fiercely:

"Wait, you fool! wait! Are you there, Josie?"

"Oh, talk away, Mrs. Barrows!" Steve cried cheerfully, when she continued silent. "I'm not half as dangerous now as yonder ugly devil, I'll bet on that."

"I'll attend to you presently, my boy," retorted Kirk, with a vicious accent on every word. "Are you injured, Josie?"

"No, I am not hurt; but the breath is almost squeezed out of me."

"Let them out," Barrows said, sharply.

"You wait until I am ready!" cried Kirk, with augmented ferocity. "If you move that bed before I say, I'll throw you from the window. Go downstairs and get the clothesline."

"What do you want of the clothesline?" demanded Barrows.

"He's going to hang me!" cried Steve Manley, from the bed. "Don't get it."

"I am going to make sure that you don't give me the slip before I've had my little say

with you," Kirk quickly answered. "You go get the line, Barrows!"

Even Sidney Barrows appeared disturbed by the lawyer's bitter violence, and his face was as pale as ashes when he left the room to obey. It was evident enough that this Michael Kirk was the head and front of any knavery existing there, and that both Barrows and his wife, if not this scoundrel's tools, were at least subservient to Kirk's ugly will.

Steve was discerning enough to have appreciated this, but this alone was not enough; for the heart of the mystery still was veiled in obscurity.

"Say, what's the next move, Mr. Kirk?" Steve cheerfully inquired, putting on a bold front.

Though he could not see the villain, he could hear him moving excitedly about, closing and securing the windows and drawing down the curtains.

"You'll know soon enough," he replied, harshly. "I warned you not to cross my path, or you'd get the worst of it."

"Well, you've got the drop on me just now," Steve returned, with a dryness at which even Josie Barrows was inclined to snicker.

"And I mean to keep it."

"Look out that I don't fool you."

"I am not the kind that messenger boys can fool," snarled the lawyer. You'll soon find that out."

"Will I? Not till after you have found out that I'm not a messenger boy," retorted Steve, now working to reach his revolver. "I fooled you in that right enough. You'll stop and think before going too far, when you learn that I am one of O'Mara's detectives. I'll inform you personally, and save Mrs. Barrows the trouble."

"Oh, it would have been no trouble, once safely out of this devilish bed!" cried Josie Barrows, sharply.

"Is this true, Josie?" demanded Kirk, striding to the bed and peering down at them through the aperture over their heads.

"Yes, it is! And you want to look out for him, too, for he is wriggling about in here like a snake, and trying to get at his revolver!"

"He'll get a ball from mine, if he tries that game."

"You don't look any prettier when you are mad," grinned Steve, looking up at his ugly, white face, and observing the vengeful glow of his sunken black eyes. "Why don't you go and hold your wrists under a cold-water faucet? You're overheated."

The answer Kirk might have made to this was never uttered, for Barrows returned at that moment with the clothesline. Kirk quickly cut off three yards or more, then whipped his revolver from his pocket.

"Take that gun, Sidney!" he sharply commanded; "and stand on that side of the bed. If this fellow shows the first sign of fight, shove the muzzle against his head and fire."

"He'll have the chance, all right!" cried Steve. "Just drop this bed and I'll show you what I'm made of."

Though Barrows accepted the weapon, his face was bloodless and his hands shook like an aspen leaf.

Michael Kirk, with the look of a fiend on his drawn and haggard features, hastened to close and lock the chamber door, removing the key.

Then he sprang to the side of the bed, snarling fiercely:

"Are you ready, Barrows?"

"Yes."

And the ominous click of the weapon followed his word.

"Lay hold there, then."

"Say when."

"Now!"

Together they threw open the heavy bed, and Kirk at once sprang at the detective.

But Steve was as good as his word. The instant he felt himself free, he made a plunge for the floor and a dive for his weapon.

Barrows reached suddenly forward with his arm extended, but before he could fire the weapon in his hand, Josie Barrows had reached up and sent it flying across the room.

"You fool!" she cried, in a furious whisper. "Are you mad?"

An oath broke from the lips of Kirk when he observed and heard her.

He had caught Steve on the floor, and then was kneeling above him, struggling furiously

to prevent the lithe young detective from rising, and from drawing his weapon.

Then, close upon the angry oath he had uttered, both observers saw Michael Kirk's clenched hand rise and fall, once, twice and thrice, with all the brutal strength of which the cur and coward was capable.

Only a single groan followed the brutal blows.

Then the muscles combating him relaxed, the form under him turned limp as a rag, and Steve Manley, bleeding, senseless, with eyes rolled back in his skull, lay like a dead man on the chamber floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN KNAVES FALL OUT.

Ten minutes later the chamber was in darkness, and Sidney Barrows and his wife were seated in the library, with fear pictured in their pale and doubtful faces, and with their ears strained for any sound that might come from below.

Below was the cellar of the house.

It was then lighted by an oil lamp placed on the stairs.

Inanimate on the hard cement floor lay Steve Manley, with his arms bound at either side.

Above him, grim, angular, with a face like that of a demon who feared his designs to have been perverted, stood Michael Kirk, gazing searchingly about.

He was looking for a place in which to conceal the form on the floor, lest other officers should appear there in search of him.

Suddenly the furnace met his evil eyes. It was not the modern portable kind, but was a huge brick affair, built up against the foundation wall of the house, and reaching to the floor above.

On one side a square iron door in the brick-work gave admission to the air-chamber, making the firepot accessible in case re-

pairs were needed. The door was about two feet square, and about the same distance above the floor.

"Fool me, will you?" muttered Kirk, hastening to open the iron door and look into the tomblike place by the light of a match.

"Fool me, eh? You'll not find it so easy to fool Michael Kirk, once his blood is up. Queer my game, will he? Queer my game before I can pull it off? No, no, I guess not! Not if his life has to be taken, shall he do that! I warned you! I warned you! Now pay the price for meddling with Michael Kirk, you infernal cub!"

Maintaining this string of muttered maledictions, and with a quick, nervous energy, which in such time and place and deed gave him the aspect of a madman, he hurriedly raised Steve from the floor, thrust him brutally through the narrow aperture, and dropped him bodily to the floor of the air-chamber of the furnace.

Then he closed the iron door, and secured it against the possibility of escape in that direction.

"Fool me, will you!" he again muttered, viciously, shaking his fist at his own work. "I'll teach you to meddle with Michael Kirk. I warned you! Now pay the price!"

Then he quickly crossed the cellar, taking the light from the stairs, and hastened to rejoin his two confederates in the library.

"What have you done?" Barrows tremulously demanded, the moment Kirk entered.

"Shoved him into the furnace air-chamber, where he may live or die, as he likes!" cried Kirk, with a mingled leer and scowl.

But the evil satisfaction pictured in this scoundrel's haggard face had no reflection in the countenance of Josie Barrows. Her handsome face was as pale as his, more pale, indeed; but the look in her brilliant eyes, the knitting of her arched brows, and the un-

usual firmness of her lips, indicated the uprising of a resentment within. Half an eye might have seen that her will and courage were double those of the pale, delicate husband from beside whom she suddenly arose.

"Look here, Mr. Kirk!" she cried, with suppressed vehemence; "you've not killed that detective, have you?"

She looked and spoke much as when she called down Steve Manley a half-hour before, and it was plain that she felt no need of a weapon in calling down the miscreant she now confronted.

"It's not likely I've killed him," returned Kirk, frowning darkly; "but suppose I had?"

"We will suppose nothing of the kind!" cried the woman. "Nor shall anything of the kind occur. I'll have you know we are not lending ourselves to murder, nor running our necks into a hangman's noose."

"Is that so?"

"And, furthermore, we have about made up our minds to wash our hands of this other affair."

"That's easier said than done, since it has gone so far, and your hands already are so badly soiled," retorted Kirk, with malicious significance.

Yet the determination she had expressed evidently affected him unpleasantly.

"It can be done easily enough, Michael Kirk, if we so decide."

"But you'll not do it."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Why this sudden change, may I ask?" snarled Kirk, throwing himself into a chair.

"Because the scheme now looks like a probable failure, that's why! And we had much better escape with a whole skin while there is time," said Josie, sharply.

"Why do you say that?" cried Kirk, angrily.

"You yourself have said that Radcliff refuses to consider your offer."

"He'll reconsider that refusal."

"I have my doubts of it."

"Well I have not!" Kirk forcibly persisted. "Good Heavens, do you think that man will suffer a trial and conviction, rather than make terms with me which would result in his release and exoneration? You're mad!"

"I know only what you have this evening told——"

"It don't matter what I have told," the lawyer sharply interrupted. "I know what I am about. I yet shall bring Radcliff to terms. Are you fools enough to let this venture fail at this late hour, after putting months and months into it? Our plans——"

"Don't call them our plans!" cried Josie Barrows, with sudden vehemence. "The design never was ours. It was yours alone."

"You were ready enough to co-operate in it, both of you," retorted Kirk.

"But chiefly because you pictured it as being far more feasible than it has proved, and that by it a fortune could easily be secured."

"And so it may be, if you two don't go to pieces at the last moment."

"What does Radcliff say about it?" demanded Josie.

"That's what I came here to tell you. He——" and Kirk glanced contemptuously at the white face of Sidnew Barrows; "he showed the white feather the moment I told him, and insisted that I should come here and consult with you. I'd have taken this chance of being seen here for no other reason."

"Never mind all that. What does Radcliff say?"

"He demands to know in precisely what way I propose to save him."

"You cannot tell him that!"

"I know that without your saying so," snarled Kirk.

"What can you do about it?"

"Beat about the bush, of course, until I can bring him to my own terms."

"But I understood that he refuses even to consider the price."

"I admit that we may have to shade the figure."

"To what?"

"To one-half of the original."

"That is decidedly broad shading," declared the girl, with a curl of her thin lips.

"Better a half-loaf than none," growled Kirk.

"What have you told him?"

"I told him this morning that I certainly could clear him."

"What did he say to that?"

"He demanded to know in what way?"

"You did not tell him!"

"I told him I could not and would not inform him in what way, but that I would guarantee to accomplish it for the price."

"Fifty thousand dollars?"

"Precisely."

"Did he show any signs of yielding?"

"Decidedly so! I now feel certain that, before he will take the chances of trial and conviction, he will accept my terms. With the money safe in hand, the rest will be easy."

"Why easy?"

"What a question!" cried Kirk, with a snarl of contempt. "If the missing girl is produced, won't that end it?"

"So far as Radcliff is concerned—yes!" snapped Josie, with bitter asperity. "But how about us?"

"You will not be liable!" cried Kirk. "They cannot prove a conspiracy. They cannot show that Belle West has not actually been away from here, nor that she lies in stating that she knew absolutely nothing of this report of her murder, and the arrest of Radcliff."

"I am not so sure of it, after what has happened here to-night."

"Well, I am sure of it, and I know much more about the possibilities involved than you do," Kirk sharply rejoined. "Once we get the money, all you two will need to do is to move out of Pittsburg with your share of the fortune, and within a year the whole thing will have blown over, and we all will be so much the winners. Furthermore, you cannot give up the scheme at this stage; for, if you do that, Radcliff is sure to go under, unless you expose the whole thing. You have no resource but to play the game out to a finish."

"I don't feel so easy about it, since I know O'Mara's suspicions are aroused," said Josie, still doubtfully shaking her head.

"Suspicion!" exclaimed Kirk, contemptuously. "Suspicion don't convict anybody. I told you in the beginning that we should have to face suspicion, both before and after the design had been executed."

"All that may be true."

"I know it is true."

"Yet O'Mara may advise Radcliff not to yield to your demand, if the chief suspects there has been some conspiracy in operation."

"I don't care what he suspects, providing that he can prove nothing!" cried Kirk, with an ugly display of impatience.

"Whatever his suspicions are," he continued, "he cannot stop the working of the law, and Radcliff will surely be brought to trial unless the police can produce sufficient tangible evidence to warrant a stay of proceedings. Suspicion won't do that, you can bet on that, and it rests with us to prevent any discovery of the actual case. That's why I insist that that cub in the cellar must not escape us."

"I won't see him killed!" Barrows now cried, sharply. "I did not agree to commit any such crime as that, and I will not be a party to it."

"Nor I!" added Josie, firmly. "I would

not have shot him to-night, even if he had walked straight by me and out of the house. But I gave him a strong enough bluff that I would."

A grim mingling of disdain and disapproval showed in Kirk's sullen features.

"You two make me tired," he growled, impatiently. "You were not cut out to do this job, despite that you consented to it."

"I'll not stand for murder!" Barrows again declared, with a decisive shake of his head.

"There'll be no need of it!" cried Kirk. "All we require to do is to keep the fellow under cover until we can drive Radcliff to the wall. That should be accomplished within a week. His trial will not be postponed, and I know well enough that he will weaken before then. You two must pull yourselves together, and put up a front the same as you have been doing, and the affair yet will terminate in our favor. I know what I am about. And I know Radcliff will weaken before—where are you going?"

Barrows had risen to his feet, and was about to leave the room.

"Not far!" he turned and said, curtly. "What's the matter with you, that I cannot move without first asking your permission?"

"Nothing's the matter with me; it's your own infernally bad disposition."

"Well, I'll admit I'm tired of being bossed by you."

"Yet you might answer a civil question."

"I am going to the kitchen for water, if you need to know," said Barrows, leaving the room with a frown on his delicate white face.

But he did not go to the kitchen for water.

He rather went for the lamp which Michael Kirk had brought up from the cellar, and left lighted on the kitchen table.

The moment he was alone, moreover, he hastened his steps. The fears which so long had been showing in his face could no longer suffer inaction.

It was fear lest Michael Kirk had indeed killed Steve Manley, despite his denial, or that the latter might helplessly die there in the house. And Sidney Barrows, unable to endure the suspense of his uncertainty, had started for the cellar to make sure of what had occurred.

With the lamp in his tremulous hand, with his face pale with dread, he opened the cellar door and descended the stairs.

The door swung to and closed behind him.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW STEVE SOLVED THE MYSTERY.

Two or three blows from a man's fist are not sufficient to still the vitality of a sturdy boy, and the "infernal cub," so-called, gradually came to himself.

When he fairly regained consciousness, Steve's first thought was of what had occurred, and then of his present condition and location.

Neither were at all to his fancy.

"I'm in a mighty tight place, wherever it is!" he said to himself. "But the fool that tied these lines needs to take a few lessons in making knots!"

As a matter of fact, Michael Kirk had not been particular in securing the young detective. That Steve could possibly escape from his place of confinement had seemed utterly impossible.

But Steve was a slippery youngster, as Kirk was destined to discover.

It required only a few minutes for him to free his arms, and then he waited and listened. Through the furnace pipes he could faintly hear the sound of voices.

"They sound from overhead," he said to himself. "The crooks are still up, but what hole is this I'm in? It's like being in a coffin."

His confines were narrow, indeed, and only by wriggling about could he move at all.

"The floor and walls are of stone, and here's an iron door," he muttered, feeling about with his hands. "But what the deuce is this big round thing?"

Then another peculiar feature of the place took his attention.

From some quarter below him, and apparently coming through the floor itself, there was a steady draught of air. Wriggling below the "round thing," he reached down and found an opening in the floor, about two feet square. It was through this that the draught came; and upon making this discovery, Steve instantly guessed the truth.

"I'll take my oath! I am in the air chamber of the furnace!" he exclaimed under his breath. "It's plain enough now. And this big round thing is the firepot. Whew! All I've got to say is they took a curious place to hide me in. I hope they won't start a furnace fire."

He was not idle while thus communing. He made an effort to force the iron door, and speedily found that to be impossible.

Then another thought struck him, giving him a thrill by the possibility suggested.

"The airbox!" he muttered. "This draught must make in from out of doors, and through a cellar window. The tunnel must run under the cellar floor and up to the window. I wonder how long it is, and how big."

With Steve Manley, to wonder was to act. Turning over upon his stomach, he worked himself closer to the aperture in the floor, and reached down and into it. It was fully two feet square, and about six inches below the cellar floor.

"Oh, I don't know! I believe I can crawl through it," Steve said to himself, in some excitement. "It'll be a deuce of a fix, though, if I get in there and cannot get out. I never can work back here feet first.

"But it must lead out to a window, or to an opening in the cellar air box," he further

reasoned. "Not fool him, eh! Just watch me! I'll take the chance!"

In considerable excitement now, he worked himself through the intense darkness, and thrust his head and shoulders into the narrow tunnel. He found the lower surface to be of earth and stone, and that he could by a strenuous effort wriggle down to it. Meantime the draught was blowing steadily in his face.

"It comes from a window, right enough!" he cried softly. "And here goes!"

Then he wriggled in and down, and after quite a good many contortions he found himself flat on his face in the tunnel, and under the cellar floor.

To wriggle along like a snake was not difficult, despite that the quarters were narrow; and, at the end of five minutes, Steve had covered, as nearly as he could judge the distance, about fifteen feet.

Then the course of the tunnel turned upward, and instead of the earthly dampness, Steve now could smell the odor of dry wood, and the sweetness of the night air.

"I'm near the end of it," he muttered, hopefully. "This woodwork must be the airbox in the cellar, and above that is the window."

Now, turning upon his back, he gradually worked on and upward, till he sat squarely on the earth, and within the vertical airbox.

"Hello!" he suddenly muttered.

In feeling over the wooden surface directly in front of him he suddenly had discovered that a portion of it yielded slightly under the pressure of his hands.

"It's the door of the airbox, the trap that opens into the cellar!" he decided. "And it's a hundred to one that only a wooden button secures it. If I'm right, I'll settle that very quickly."

Fishing out his knife, he thrust the blade through a crack where the partition yielded,

and almost immediately verified his belief. The blade came in contact with the button; and the latter, old and loose on its screw, easily yielded to his pressure.

In another moment Steve had softly raised the trap, which swung down on hinges, and discovered that he now had an easy access to the cellar floor. More delighted than relieved, despite the desperate chance he had taken, the young detective crawled out through the trap and softly closed it behind him.

He barely had gained the cellar, however, before he heard the sound of approaching feet overhead, and saw the gleam of a light at the top of the stairs.

Sidney Barrows was at that moment descending.

Steve looked about for a hiding-place, and darted behind a corner of the coalbin.

White and trembling, Barrows came with nervous tread down the stairs and placed the lamp on a box nearby.

Without so much as a glance around the cellar, he hastened to approach the furnace and remove a length of joist, with which Michael Kirk had secured the iron door in one side of the brick structure.

Then Barrows lighted a match, and opening the door, thrust his head into the aperture.

Moving as quickly and as silently as a cat, for he still was shoeless, Steve crossed the cellar with the intention of securing him then and there.

At the same moment when Barrows, startled at not finding what he expected, quickly withdrew his head and rose erect, Steve caught him from behind and clapped one hand over the young man's mouth.

And then Steve Manley was more surprised than ever before in all his life.

The moment his arm closed around Barrows the truth broke like a sudden revelation upon the young detective's mind.

For the slight, yielding form he so forcibly had seized was not that of a man—but that of a girl!

"Good God!" gasped Steve, still holding her fast. "You're a girl! By thunder, you're Belle West!"

There was little need for him to forcibly attempt to stifle any cry that she might have attempted to make; for, with the sound of Steve's words in her ear, and with this realization of her inevitable exposure, the girl—for she was indeed Belle West—instantly ceased struggling, and stood like one crushed and humiliated, with her head sunk on her breast.

But Steve was not taking chances of any further duplicity. He had felt the outline of the revolver the girl still carried, and suddenly reaching down, he drew it from her pocket. Then he removed his hand from over her mouth, commanding, sternly:

"Don't you speak above a whisper!"

"You need not fear!" she exclaimed, almost with a sob; and she raised to his a pair of eyes that were burning painfully, and cheeks that were crimson with shame. "What use for me to make an outcry—now!"

"Do you admit that you are Belle West?" demanded Steve, sternly.

"What good would it do me to deny it, after this?" she asked, with drooping head.

"None at all," said Steve, curtly. "Who is upstairs?"

"If I refuse——"

"You will not refuse! Tell me who is upstairs!"

"Michael Kirk and my sister."

"Then your fake marriage was only part of the game?"

"I may as well admit that, also."

"Where are the two?"

"In the library."

"Hold out your hands!"

The girl, humbled beyond description,

obeyed him without lifting her head; and within a minute Steve had her tied hand and foot with the line by which he himself had been secured.

Then he left her sitting on the cellar stairs, and stole softly up to the hall above.

As he drew near the library the voice of Michael Kirk reached his ears.

"You will do what I command in this affair, Josie!" he was saying, in his harsh and sinister fashion. "It has gone too far for any of us to turn back. If you think I now will give it up because of that infernal boy, you are mistaken. He is safe enough where he is until morning, and then——"

"And then, Mr. Michael Kirk, you will occupy a cell in the Tombs, and find that I again have fooled you!" interrupted Steve.

At the same moment he strode straight into the room and to the open window, and fired two shots with startling reports upon the still night air, then swung sharply around and aimed the weapon point-blank at the non-plussed lawyer's head.

"A move from either one of you will bring another shot, and one that may kill!" he cried, in ringing tones. "If you wish to live, Michael Kirk, you will sit where you are, and order Josie West to do likewise."

Kirk's jaw had fallen like that of a dead man, and Josie West sat half-fainting in her chair.

Before either could recover and attempt anything desperate, even if so inclined, the helmet and face of one of the city police, who had heard the reports of the revolver, appeared at the library window.

"Come in here, officer!" cried Steve. "I have cornered a triplet of crooks, who want to talk to you. Come right through the window, and lend me a hand!"

It is quite needless to add that the officer promptly responded.

And, indeed, but little more is needed than

a cursory explanation of the curious fraud which these culprits had attempted, and which Steve Manley had so cleverly exposed.

The design by which they had planned to swindle wealthy Dana Radcliff out of a fortune for themselves may be briefly stated. It had originated with Kirk, and by him the two West girls, whose characters were afterward shown to be a little shady, had been led to co-operate in the scheme.

For nearly a year Belle West had played a dual character without being suspected, that of Barrows and her own, passing a portion of the time at home, and a part in the genuine employment of a sewing-machine agent. In the latter character she had visited her own home, and even the neighbors did not recognize her, nor suspect that she was not a young man attentive to Josie West.

Meantime, as Belle West, she had craftily won the attentions of Radcliff, and led him to his own undoing; the three confederates believing that, if they could involve Radcliff as described, they could force him to pay liberally to escape.

On the night of the crime, both Kirk and Josie were operating with Belle, and the latter's altercation with Radcliff and her departure from his team were but a part of the infamous scheme. She had started straight for the river after leaving him, and had been brought over to Pittsburg in a boat by Michael Kirk. But not until after those indications of the apparent crime had been prepared which already have been pictured. That the design had been well planned and executed, appears in that it certainly would have been more or less successful but for the clever work of Chief O'Mara and young Steve Manley.

Before midnight the three culprits were safely lodged in jail, and ultimately suffered the punishment that fits the crime.

Not until next morning, however, did

Chief O'Mara learn that Dana Radcliff had been released from custody, nor hear what had been accomplished by the youngest member of his efficient corps of detectives.

He did not say much to Steve Manley at the time; but a day or two later he called him into his office, and received him, with an unsealed envelope held carelessly in his hand.

"Did you send for me, sir?" Steve inquired, as he entered.

"Yes, I did," Chief O'Mara gravely nodded. "It's about that West girl affair, Steve."

"What's new?" asked Steve, with a look of surprise.

Chief O'Mara passed him the envelope, and regarded him with a rather fond expression in his smiling eyes.

"It is not a badge this time, Steve," he said, genially. "It is something more substantial."

"This isn't a gold-brick game, is it?" asked Steve, with a grin.

"Not that, Steve. It's a very handsome check—from Mr. Dana Radcliff!"

Steve looked at him with a rather curious twinkle in his eyes.

"If I could only have one, Chief O'Mara," he said, quickly, "I'd take the badge!"

THE END.

Next week's SHIELD WEEKLY (No. 19) will contain "A Skin Game; or, Steve Manley Among the Tanners."

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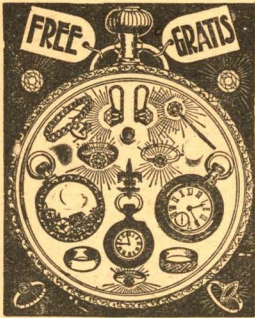


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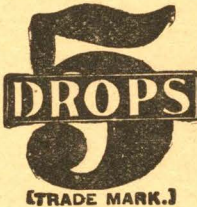
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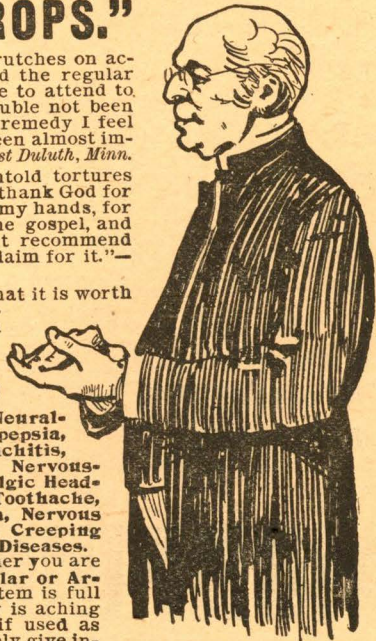


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